

## **"THE BRAIDED ROPE": THEATRE AND YOUNG PEOPLE -THEATRE, EDUCATION OR IN BETWEEN?**

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### **Introduction**

I arrived in Bergen after nearly forty hours in transit where one misadventure followed another, suffering from a sense of dislocation in which my head was somewhere different to body, and my body clock was giving me different messages to my other senses. However, I carried an excitement with me at the prospect of seeing friends and colleagues, sharing my research, being challenged, extended and, most importantly, learning. This would become the most significant outcome for me from the Congress. Importantly, and perhaps not surprisingly given the nature of work, this learning would occur through embodied work, performance, and dialogue that occurred in small groups, with individuals and sharing in larger groups.

It is on this small group sharing and dialogue that I now wish to report. I had nominated before leaving Australia to be part of one Special Interest Group (SIG), but upon arriving in Bergen I toyed with the idea of moving to another. As synchronicity would have it, I ended up where I needed to be—a choice not consciously made, but informed by some sense of what I could learn and also contribute. This SIG, facilitated admirably by Tony Jackson, Sharon Grady, and Vigdis Aune had a brief to focus on "the diverse practices that are embraced by theatre with, by and for young people ... and the emerging field of 'Applied Theatre'".

Within this SIG, Tony, Sharon and Vigdis initially set up a series of "posts"

that named different aspects of the larger brief where participants could elect to work within smaller focus groups. A series of provocations were then placed around the hall at these posts and participants were able to move to a primary concern or interest that attracted them. We were asked to choose one of these on the basis of—in the facilitator's words—"What you do and/or are attracted to thinking more about or doing something on with other folks..." These posts/provocations included:

- Theatre Form. This smaller focus group was concerned in part with theatre practice and the challenge of physical theatre, popular culture, and technology.
- Participation Theatre and Youth Theatre. Both of these groups split up into two more groups where there was a consideration of work by, with and for young people.
- Marginalized Youth. This group focused on young people with specialised needs, potentially including those emotionally disturbed or on probation. A further group was concerned with,
- Funding/networking/policy making. This group focused on how to establish those structures that work. And finally,
- Specialized Content. This focus group potentially included such areas as Museums, Health and Therapy. It was with this last group that I chose to work.

## **The Role of the participatory researcher**

My role in the larger SIG was two fold: first, I was an active participant in the smaller focus group just mentioned, and second, I acted co-jointly with John O'Toole as a "researcher" within both the smaller and larger groups where we were to observe, reflect, and provoke through (re)presenting what we saw, and importantly what we didn't see—that is, what potentially could have been part of the work of the group, but wasn't apparent. The function of this role then was to create a potential space for dialogue through reflection, refraction and magnification. In fulfilling this role both John and I moved in and out of smaller groups—with John moving from group to group while I elected to remain with the one focus group previously mentioned—and then we both shared our observations with the larger SIG as a whole.

There were a number of things that strongly stood out for me from the beginning of these symposia. First, how similar and dissimilar we were; that is, there was a wonderful diversity of participants present who encompassed different cultural traditions, theory and diversity of practice. However, it was our commitment to drama as a way of working, knowing and inquiry that we held in common, for example, the way that the process of embodiment was linked with reflection. Second, there was an enormous amount of expertise within this SIG, and one big idea for me was that we were able, that is, there was no one better to

ask questions of, and inquire into this work, than us. This awareness promoted an understanding of the group dynamic that infused our work, reflecting the collective nature of drama work, and the competence that existed within this SIG. Third, there was a clear process that occurred within the focus group and the SIG that consisted of four stages:

- Naming. In this stage we "named" ourselves, and what we did.
- Describing. In this stage we described the nature of our work and the tensions that we felt—recognising that there were productive as well as negative tensions.
- Relationship building. In this stage we not only built relationships with each other, but also sought to establish relationships between our work, recognising patterns of similar concerns, and parallels where we could share expertise and ideas. In other words, links emerged, were thought about, and established.
- Explanation. This final stage was where we sought understanding that linked and started to theorise our work. What is important about this last stage was that while we recognised this to be a goal, we were also clear that understanding would emerge through successive approximations rather than being a final resting place at which we would all arrive at.

An interesting parallel with this process was how we moved from the particular to the universal, and how the small groups provided a structure for continuing the dialogue in a way that the larger group could not. This issue was also flagged as to how this community might continue to support and provide a structure for this dialogue after the Congress was finished.

## Shared Understandings

One of the most important outcomes from our discussions within the small focus group was some of the shared understandings that started to emerge. These shared understandings not only reveal the nature of our work, and those who participated in it, but also are important for culture building within drama education:

- This work is driven by inquiry; that is, there are artistic, human, and intellectual questions to be answered as well as questions of the body. What this means is that we are continually inquiring into: What does it mean to be human? How can we use drama as a mode of enquiry? And how can we (re)present our new or emergent understanding in an aesthetic and embodied way?
- It is the ability to inquire into the intersection of fields of knowledge and understanding where our work has the potential to be most revealing, rather than just doing what we know. This understanding suggests that it is the intersection of fields of knowledge and context that are rich with potential.

However, this is not to underplay work where there is a developmental agenda. For example, the use of drama/theatre in an information giving way to convey an anti-smoking message to large groups of young people, in contrast to an exploration in small groups of what it might mean to be put under peer group pressure to smoke. Each of these approaches are useful in the appropriate context.

- All of our work involves risk taking. This shared understanding recognises the inherently dynamic way that we work, where it is not always possible to say where we will end up. Furthermore, we also understand that in order to move beyond the already known requires an openness and level of trust by the participants, in other words risk-taking, even though we work to minimise those risks through attending to group needs and dynamics. We also understand that it is this element of risk-taking by actors and participants that can so powerfully engage an "audience".
- Not all will be revealed in the here and now, but some seeds can be sown that will bear fruit in future; that is, we shouldn't expect there always to be instant answers to our inquiry. Rather, sometimes a question will be posed and we move towards understanding by degrees. In addition, this questing can well be multi-modal and may involve talking, writing, thinking alone and in groups, as well as various forms of embodied and presentational work.
- The nature of the work involves a process of selection and (re)presentation. Interestingly, this can raise a tension as to what is left out as well as what is included, that is, in any form of (re)presentation there are always some aspects foregrounded at the expense of others. What is important about this idea is that the space where there is "nothing" is just as useful as the space that is filled.

This notion is encapsulated in the following:

*We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel.*

*But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends.*

*We turn clay to make a vessel.*

*But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends.*

*We pierce doors and windows to make a house; and it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends.*

*Therefore just as we take advantage of what is, we should recognise the usefulness of what is not. (Tao Te Ching)*

The work of the small group over the week culminated in these issues. The *models* used include personal story, research, lived experience where personal dilemmas become the content, and how these are shaped by site-specific demands. The *tensions* included struggles with: content and form; public and private; being didactic as well as participatory; teacher artist and friend, and the struggle

between creativity and discipline. The *content* included areas such as health education, anti-drug education, dealing with abuse, relationships, well-being issues and anti-racism. The *forms* included group-devised, director facilitated, commissioned, community-based work and site-specific. While these lists by no means are meant to cover the diversity of practice that exists, they did represent the range of experience within the focus group.

## Interesting Questions

As part of our ongoing deliberations within the focus group, the following questions arose. These questions could be seen to establish an emergent research agenda for those people interested in Specialised Content.

- How do we make an impact on the young people that we work with, and how do we know?
- What is important about the nature of the work, in terms of education and learning, and how do you describe this to an alien? This term was chosen deliberately to reflect some of the challenges in communication that group members had experienced.
- What is "quality" in terms of facilitation/transformation, and by what/whose standards? And in addition, how does "passion" in our work function to have an up and a down side?
- What drama/theatre forms are best suited for what groups? And under what conditions?

For example, in our small group we had participants who work as drama pedagogues in Western Europe, health educators who worked in the big cities and rural areas of Asia, community workers and university educators in Australia. Each of the groups that we work with brings its own set of complexities, expectations and thresholds. Associated with this question is the allied question of when should participation be foregrounded in favour of observation, and vice versa?

A subsequent question that flowed out of the previous ones related to the ethical considerations that are part and parcel of this particular work. For example, what compromises could/should be made in terms of:

- requirements of funding agencies—including issues of funding and balancing what can often be a didactic or message-driven objective with the often processual nature of the work,
- aesthetic considerations—including the available time and the skill level of those who will be artists or potential artists, cultural norms and content.

In other words where lies the balance between content and form? And in what way does context shape these considerations?

- In these days of diminishing resources and "outcomes-based" approaches, how much drama is enough?
- What is the boundary between Education and Therapy? And when does personal development become healing?
- What is the line between public and private life? And who has responsibility for making determinations between private and public good?

And the big question of:

- What is the nature of young people's transformation in and through theatre/drama, and how do we know?

## Conclusion

One of the most powerful ideas that I left the SIG with was a graphic that we developed in our focus group. In this graphic each way of working, each of the ideas, tensions, questions generated was "held" as one of three lines that appeared as strand of a rope that was braided together. This represented in a graphic way the interconnected nature of our work and inquiry, and while we had teased out and considered particular elements, it was the unity of them that lent the rope its strength.

I left the SIG with an enhanced understanding of a greater diversity of practice, a more (collective) informed position in relation to some of the issues raised, the potential of group process and lived experience, and the importance of being part of a community.

IDEA itself holds many of the keys to these questions, and the use of technology complemented by face-to-face dialogue, presentations of work, and reflective practice that is shared within a supportive community of artists, students, teachers and scholars is a wonderful start. May the dialogue continue! Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of each member of the small focus group, the participants within the SIG as a whole, and particularly the leadership of Sharon, Tony and Vigdis. Any faults or omissions within this paper are mine entirely.

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